

RESEARCH

Ideas for Improving High School Reading and Academic Success

Source: Cappella, Elise and Rhona S. Weinstein, "Turning around reading achievement: Predictors of high school students' academic resilience," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 93, no. 4, 758-771. Abstract by Douglas B. Reeves, Ph.D.

Researchers: Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley.

Method: Five year nationwide longitudinal study, following more than 11,000 students from grade 8 through grade 12. The researchers measured initial academic and psychological variables and then followed these students through high school.

Results:

1) Middle School Reading is Crucial: Of those students who performed below grade level in 8th grade, 85% continued to have academic difficulties throughout high school and their reading ability, in particular, remained low. If reading achievement is not addressed in grades 6, 7, and 8, it is very difficult to address it in high school.

2) Academic Curriculum is Key: Of the 15% of students who "broke the mold" and were unsuccessful readers in 8th grade, but later achieved proficient reading in intermediate and advanced classes, their high school curriculum was a key variable. In particular, these unusual successful students took an academic curriculum. The researchers defined "academic curriculum" as that which included "four [years of] English, three social studies, two mathematics, and two science classes—which is the minimum preparation for postsecondary education" (p. 763). The impact of this academic curriculum was as great as the impact of demographic characteristics on the success of the students. Note that this finding is consistent with other research the Center has used that indicates that curriculum is as powerful or more powerful than income and ethnicity in determining academic success. In this study, of all the variables studied, the researchers reported that in predicting high school success, "Academic curriculum contributed the most variance, followed by ethnicity, locus of control, and gender" (p. 767). This has profound policy implications because it is precisely the opposite strategy that most high

schools employ. Students with 8th grade reading deficiencies are routinely recommended for non-academic courses of study or the students themselves choose such a course. When, however, they choose the more challenging and perhaps less comfortable path of a rigorous academic high school curriculum, their reading ability and comprehensive academic success in high school increases.

3) 8th Grade Psychological Variables are Significant: The researchers studied three psychological variables, including self-esteem, locus of control, and future educational expectations as potential predictors of high school success. Of these three, it was locus of control—the personal belief that hard work is more important than luck and the belief that planning is related to future success—that was more important than self-esteem or even future educational plans. This is also exceedingly significant, as the finding is at variance with common practice in many middle schools that emphasizes self-esteem and student opinions about future educational goals more than hard work and planning.

Comments: Wherever the Center consultants work, we hear that "You can make changes in elementary school, but secondary schools are too tough – you just can't change them." Perhaps that explains why we can continue to look at 6th graders who have poor reading skills and fail to remedy that with intensive interventions before 9th grade. Perhaps that explains why we continue to allow an 8th grade student to choose non-academic tracks in high school. And perhaps that explains why we emphasize self-esteem over academic rigor. Worst of all, this persistence in old beliefs unsupported by research may explain why we continue to accept a posture of impotence, convinced that demographics are destiny rather than accepting a posture of power, that educators and school leaders can make a profound difference by making wise but unpopular choices in curriculum for under-achieving students.

This excellent article includes abundant citations from other studies that make clear that the present study does not stand alone in highlighting the value of reading proficiency in 8th grade, curriculum in high school, and a feeling of personal efficacy in 8th grade as factors that are related to academic resilience in high school.